

Schools cuts begin to show in state

BY JANE STANCILL - Staff Writer

North Carolina lost nearly 10,000 public school jobs for the current school year, and the state slipped to 46th in the nation in per pupil spending, a new report from the state teachers group says.

Although federal stimulus money helped keep many educators employed during the recession, schools in North Carolina cut 4,789 teacher jobs and 2,769 teacher assistants for the current year, according to the forthcoming report from the N.C. Association of Educators.

Other reductions hit the ranks of counselors, media specialists, administrators, bus drivers, custodians, secretaries and cafeteria workers. The jobs vanished through a combination of attrition, state cuts and reductions forced onto local school districts.

And more cuts are on the way as the state deals with a \$2.4 billion shortfall.

With lawmakers looking at substantial budget cuts, the teachers group says the state's slide in public education funding is already under way. North Carolina ranks above only Mississippi in the Southeast in dollars spent per student.

"Education has taken a really hard hit over the last couple of years," said Sheri Strickland, president of the association. "Even though we know that this is a problem across the country, and all states are having some level of financial difficulty, many of the states have obviously found ways to continue to fund education at a higher level than North Carolina has been able to."

But state Sen. Bob Rucho, a Republican from Matthews, said he's not inclined to pay much attention to data from the teachers association.

"If we continue following their pathway, then that's going to lead to continued disappointment in the results," Rucho said, noting that too many North Carolina students continue to drop out and too many need remedial help in college.

The report cites data from the state Department of Public Instruction, the National Education Association and a January national report called "Quality Counts" from Education Week magazine. That publication gave North Carolina a "C-plus" overall on a half dozen measures of quality. The state earned a "D" in K-12 achievement and a "B" for the teaching profession. On the spending category, North Carolina got a failing grade

There has been good news for state education in recent months. North Carolina was a winner of \$400 million in the federal government's Race to the Top grant competition. The money is earmarked for technology, professional development for teachers and turnaround programs for low-performing schools. It can't be used to backfill budget holes.

In winning the grant, the state promised to improve test scores and graduation rates substantially by 2014. North Carolina is making progress on some measures. For three straight years, high school dropout rates have declined. Still, the four-year graduation rate in North Carolina high schools is 74 percent.

"They've spent a lot of money, OK, and they've got no results for it," Rucho said. "And the people back home are saying, 'Why isn't my child having a chance to be educated? Why aren't they given an opportunity? Why don't we have choice?'"

Where N.C. ranked

Republicans have pushed for more charter schools, which some Democrats argue could sap too much money from traditional public schools.

Supporters of public schools say that North Carolina, for a time, had leaped ahead of other Southeastern states in many measures - in standards, accountability programs, growth in national board certified teachers and better salaries.

A decade ago, North Carolina had climbed to an all-time-high ranking of 20th in the nation in teacher pay; today the state is 45th, according to a ranking by the NEA, the national teachers union.

Two years ago, North Carolina ranked 40th in the nation in annual per pupil spending, at \$8,615; this year, the estimated figure is \$8,303, which would put the state at 46th in the country. South Carolina now tops North Carolina on student funding and teacher salaries, the association points out.

"We don't want to be behind South Carolina, but it's not just South Carolina, it's also Georgia and Virginia and all the states that border us that we compete with for high-quality teachers, for business and industry that want to locate in the Southeast," said Strickland, the NCAE president.

'Race to the bottom'

The declines could be called "a race to the bottom," said Jo Ann Norris, president and executive director of the Public School Forum of North Carolina, a nonprofit advocacy group for public education.

She said teachers have lost ABC bonus pay, mentor pay and supplemental pay in many local districts - on top of a few years of salary freezes.

"This is another area where we were making great strides," Norris said. "We are seeing those gains evaporate as we go into another year of recession and probably another year of a salary freeze."

Rucho said legislators would do "our very best to make sure the classrooms are the least impacted," but that it won't be business as usual.

That could mean fewer teachers, fewer assistants and fewer school staff, which may translate into bigger classrooms for North Carolina schoolchildren, Strickland said.

"I really do think that, for the most part, public schools have trimmed the fat to the greatest degree they possibly can over these last couple of budget cycles," Strickland said. "Now we are down to the people that it takes to provide the education to the children. And when we start cutting the people, then there isn't any way that won't impact kids in classrooms."

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